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ABSTRACT

In much current literary and rhetorical theory, analysis of text assumes greater authority than the text and its creator. Through a reexamination of the ancient Greeks' notion of "ethos" (the residue of the writer or speaker in the text), the writer, reader, and text can be reunited, particularly in light of the theory of meanings proposed by I. A. Richards. Richards asserted that self can be discovered through a discovery of meaning. To Richards, the text, as the work of the writer or speaker, cannot be ignored by the reader or listener, who is to derive approximate meaning. Arriving at meaning is an investigation into the psychology of the reader, the text, and the writer. The writer's character, as reflected by the text, meets the character of the reader through the mediation of the text. To Richards, language may be the only means by which human development can continue. Closer examination of the ethos of both writer and reader leads each to a greater understanding of the other and the other's misunderstandings. (Five notes are included; 23 references are attached.) (SG)

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VALUE IN THE NEW RHETORIC:
I. A. RICHARDS AND THE NECESSITY OF ETHOS

Ethos as we once thought we knew it is lost, and not.

--Jim Corder

Current literary and much of contemporary rhetorical theory has created a conundrum. As Jim Corder muses, "Poststructuralist thought announces the death of the author: Language writes us, rather than the other way around, and interpretation prevails rather than authorship" (301). Reversing hundreds, if not thousands, of years of privileging author over reader, present approaches to text are displacing the creator for the re-actor. The creation bobbles around in an abyss. Significance is up for grabs, roped and branded by whatever ideology wrestles it to the ground.

The numbers of these relations have grown as well. James Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin note, "The sociological or social-constructionist model is indeed among the reigning theories of rhetoric, and in its more extreme versions both discourse and the individual subject become a socio-ideological construct" (246). History and culture become role-players. The

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Romanticist ideal of individualism, psyche for that matter, is subordinated by sociology, mass media, normative analyses.

Authors, and their lone authority, are consequently submerged by the authority of the spokesperson. Analysis of text assumes greater authority than the text and its creator. The ethos of the critic, the re-actor, and the respondent dominate. If we are indeed in the midst of a paradigm shift a la Thomas Kuhn and Maxine Hairston, discourse is now being authorized by its audience. As readers, we carry the sharp edge of Edgar Allan Poe's pendulum to carve out interpretations.[1] The reader is the artist.

The issue, Corder queries, may well involve an ominous answer to "Does anyone remember who found the words?" (309). Corder is plaintive: "I have wanted to believe that ethos is in the text, have wanted to believe that I could find others in their texts so that I might hope to exist for others in my text so that I might turn myself over to them and thereby survive in the text I leave" (314). Wayne Booth, arguing for the revival of an ethical criticism, makes plaintive the other side, the reader who is caught in this morass. His plea is to celebrate the writers and writing that demonstrate "friendship not only in the range and depth and intensity of pleasure they offer, but finally in the irresistible invitation they extend to live during these moments a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own" (223). Booth and the company he keeps strive to reconcile the otherness of others' narratives with their own stories, not substitute them. Both Corder and Booth, writer and reader, lament the loss of each other as appropriation becomes the dominant

modus operandi. They question our modern tendency to privilege the interpreter as opposed to the intrepetant. They ask, what do we do with what and who is there before we arrived?

The question may be partially answered by reconsidering approaches to meaning. I propose we reexamine ethos, that elusive residue of a writer or speaker in the text, in light of the theory of meanings proposed by I. A. Richards, who argued that we discover self through the discovery of meanings. In order to do this, I first review Richards' "philosophy" and then argue that this theory enables a view of ethos as fluid, a process of becoming as well as the more common perception of it as solely a presentation of self.

Henry Staten argues that "there would be less uproar over the approaches to meaning loosely labeled 'post-structuralist' and 'deconstructive' if there were greater awareness of the continuities between the new Continental approaches and work that has been around in the Anglo-American world for some decades" (67). Conceiving language as an instrument downplays its referentiality, puts it in the sphere of activity rather than object. Language becomes the game rather than the score. Arguing that "the point of the de-centering technique is to counter the habit of exclusion which we inherit from Aristotelian logic," Staten notes that I. A. Richards' concept of language as instrumental rather than "referential" demands inclusion of new elements, of all forms of discourse (67). At the same time, we reconcile the disturbing tendency in post-structuralist approaches to exclude the author, the tendency to toss out the baby as we plunge the depths of the bathwater.

I am not denying the contributions to language study that post-structuralists in their many varieties offer, nor am I proposing a recidivism to the New Criticism. Somewhere we have gone awry. Current perceptions have shifted our investigations of text almost exclusively to the reader. Foucault, de Man, Derrida have effectively queried the role of the author. Reader-response and psychoanalytic criticism have effectively lobbied the reader's perspective. Social constructionism has effectively expanded the nature of authorship from the one to the many.

Richards may indeed be perceived as partially responsible for all this.[2] But perception of Richards is usually founded on a narrow view of only two of his books. And these books were early in his explorations. Richards was first and foremost a dialectician. "For the dialectician," remarks Ann Berthoff, "beginning with meaning entails recognition of the fact that we cannot get under the net of language; the correlative is the discovery that language is not simply a medium but a means" (62). She notes in another article that Richards was unconcerned with past "mistakes": "he would write another book or, at least, supply a second edition with notes in which misstatements and misconceptions were diagnosed and amended. In this way, he was true to his deepest conviction that what is needed is not disputation but dialectic" (64). The continual "audit" of meaning results in growth, in the continual re-assessment of both text and self.

Richards said he was less after a theory than a means to promote "the growth of an instrument for comparing and controlling meanings, for holding up and looking into the

miraculous but fleeting achievements" of discourse, a sensibility to led him "out of criticism into creation, out of comment on endeavors into a new endeavor" (So Much Nearer 6). "Controlling" meaning was counterpart to "comparing." "Looking" at text was counterpart to "holding up" that text and recognizing its accomplishment as well as our accomplishment in understanding it. The "new endeavor" was active as opposed to the reactive.

For Richards, "there is thus at the heart of any theory of meanings a principle of the instrument. The exploration of comprehension is the task of devising a system of instruments for comparing meanings" (Speculative Instruments 19). Reading (and for that matter, writing) requires a "plasticity" of concepts "since it is only such a continual suspension that can maintain a fluidity of response in perception adequate to the need for a continual inclusion of new elements" (Staten 70). Encountering text means encountering a realm of choices, choices that are an "activation of whole areas of language which are not actually present in the utterance but which are, as it were set vibrating by the words which are in the utterance" (70).

In Richards' approach to meaning, choices made are guided both by "the most embracing purpose" and the "entailments" of previous choices by the reader(SI 19).[3] As he suggests in his reading of Coleridge, "the subject (the self) has gone into what it perceives, and what it perceives is, in this sense, itself. So the object becomes the subject and subject the object . . . . The subject is what it is through the objects it has been" (Coleridge 57). Interpretation, perceived meaning, is a process of categorizing and sorting previous and immediate responses to

these choices, often with very little recognition or consciousness of doing so. Comparison becomes the principal activity of comprehending. But comparison is initiated by the text and what is there; what is there has been determined by who went there first. Richards' attention is thus fixed on the means of meanings--the writer's as well as those readers who follow. Arriving at meaning is therefore an implicit investigation into the psychology of the reader, the text, and the writer. Greeks of antiquity would likely have called it an investigation into ethos.

In Richards' scheme, we cannot ignore the text, a text created by a writer or speaker. A document is an instance of the character of the writer. It is not, by any means, a precise instance. Our purposes as readers are to derive approximate meanings, to interpret from that record.[4] The effect of text results in a reconciliation of tension generated by the differing entities involved. As readers, we assume authorial intent behind a text. Those intentions, represented by the text, conflict or concur with our own experiences and our particular reading of that particular text. The author, constrained by the specific context of that text during its creation as well as the continual struggle with the limits of the language being used, conveys his or her own tensions. The text, an approximate rendering of that struggle and its context, reflects this to the reader. Perception of the text becomes interpretation as the reader selects certain features to recognize or respond to.

Displaying this almost automatic, unconscious process led to C. K. Ogden and Richards' proposal of the now famous echo of

Aristotle's triangle in their early collaboration on The Meaning of Meaning in 1923. Their intention behind the triangle was to represent the basic processes of communication, "whenever any statement is made, or understood" (10). They understood the process to be a dialectic one between speaker and listener:

> When we speak, the symbolism we employ is caused partly by the reference we are making and partly by social and psychological factors--the purpose for which we are making the reference, the proposed effect of our symbols on other persons, and our own attitude. When we hear what is said, the symbols both cause us to perform an act of reference and to assume an attitude which will, according to circumstances, be more or less similar to the act and the attitude of the speaker. (10-11)

The coin is two-sided. Text is where presentation (by the author) and representation (by the reader) meet.

Richards' perception of dialectic is critical to our examining his conception of the processes of understanding, and in our recognizing Richards' efforts as a point to re-examine the author-text-reader relationships. He explicitly takes the term from Plato, noting the vagaries of its philosophical use over the centuries. In the Introduction to his translation of Plato's Republic into Basic English, he argues that Plato meant dialectic "in contrast to eristic or word-fighting, the art of the disputant who is arguing for victory, not for truth. Dialectic is a very different art of discourse, the art of making clear in any discussion what the participants are really saying and thinking"

(Plato 9). Richards' understanding of Plato is that "Dialogue and dialectic for him go together, the participating minds redressing one another's mistakings, as our two eyes see better than either can alone" (Plato 10).

Ethos is therefore implicit in any act of communication as speaker and listener "re-dress" each other in an exchange. It is an essential and non-distinct process integral to the whole act. As Baumlin and Baumlin note

> Greek philosophy makes little distinction between mental, moral, social, and physical health; each term describes the appropriate functioning of some faculty within the totality of the human/communal organism. It is for this reason above all that rhetoric, as Plato suggests, must shape itself in response to the different "types of souls." (248)

Or in a more contemporary rendering, "types of minds." In Richards' reading of Plato, the distinction is between the World of Being and the World of Becoming. Richards, aligning his own rhetoric with an understanding of psychological principles as well as the concept that language is representative of experience (a type of Idea or Form), can then argue that the character of the speaker meets the character of the listener through the mediation of the utterance:

> An Idea or Form is not a happening in a mind (or a head). It is an object which certain happenings in minds can be OF. As a Form (or Idea, or object of thought), it has an entirely different status from that of any instance of it and from any event in anyone's

> mind, any thinking of it. But two people cannot strictly see the same instances of it; their eyes are different. (Plato 6)

Mediation is the articulation of those differences. Or as Richards extrapolates from Coleridge, "that in the products of knowing we later have occasion to distinguish Subject from Object does not entail their separation in the process" (Coleridge 53). He acknowledges Plato's distrust of writing, careful to note, "he even goes so far, in his Phaedrus (274-5), as to make Socrates attack writing because written words have no power to defend themselves from misunderstanding" (Plato 10). Richards, however, argues that the dialectic principle, the process, is the same. Encountering text, the reader must still engage in a dialogue, a movement back and forth between what the reader meets in the text and what the reader brings to the encounter. The implicit character of the writer, as reflected by the text, meets the character of the reader through the mediation of the text.

Rhetoric, for Richards, is not the Aristotelian counterpart of dialectic. Rhetoric, as a field of study and as a practice, is the umbrella under which eristic and dialectic conjoin and become something more palatable. He argues that, "Rhetoric and Dialectic, quarrelling with one another, jointly forgot their common aim. And now it is not easy to see in these products of scholastic drudgery the issue of an original concern with the salvation of man" (SI 169). Rather Richards has bigger plans for rhetoric. As a proponent, especially for a new or reformulated rhetoric for the twentieth century, Richards centralizes the idea that "language is an instrument for controlling our becoming"

(Speculative Instruments 9).[5] Language, "the instrument of all our distinctively human development" (Philosophy of Rhetoric 131), is probably the only thing we have with which to continue that development. The characters involved, the ethos of the participants, both form and are formed by the instruments they use.

It is in recognizing both the value and the responsibility of language and language users that Richards is most vehement. Who we are and who we become are reflected by the language we use. But as we shape language, language shapes us. He argues, "language has become a repository, a record, a reflection, as it were, of human nature" (Practical Criticism 208). As such, it carries with it the ethos of those who have gone before. Convinced of the pervasiveness of language, Richards perceived it as a dialectic both historical and contemporaneous, both personal and social, both formed and formative.

Richards observes that "the traditional schemas by which man gave an account of himself and the world in which he lived were made by him, and though they have lost their power to help him as they formerly helped him, he has not lost his power to make new ones" (Coleridge 226). Closer examination and extension of Richards' theory of meaning as a means to make and to examine our natures, the ethos of both writer and reader, then leads us to understand one another and our misunderstandings. We may then be able to send word to Jim Corder that "ethos is in there somewhere" (315), that we are finding it and it is finding us.

Notes

I thank Thomas Willard and Marvin Diogenes for their valuable readings in the development of this paper.

Note: Subsequent references in the text to some of I. A. Richards' works are abbreviated as follows: Coleridge on Imagination (Coleridge), The Meaning of Meaning (MM), Mencius on Mind (Mencius), Philosophy of Rhetoric (PR), Plato's Republic (Plato), Practical Criticism (PC), Principles of Literary Criticism (PLC), So Much Nearer (SMN), Speculative Instruments (SI).

[1] Stanley Fish, in a recent article, uses the idea of watching a horror movie to oppose this trend. He suggests that our analytical understanding that certain devices are being used to invite response does not affect nor neutralize our response. We know we are watching a horror movie, but respond all the same, often viscerally. Fish indicates that "one must forget the analytical perspective one might have on the practice at another time." He suggests, "it would be more accurate to say that an analytic perspective on a practice does not insulate one from experiencing the practice in all its fullness, that is, in the same way one would experience it were the analytical perspective unavailable." (21n)

[2] Richards would certainly agree with the difficulties encountered in determining meaning, but spent his life elaborating a means of overcoming those difficulties. His early theorizing about the nature of reading and criticism in

Principles of Literary Criticism and his work with student protocols as outlined in Practical Criticism are credited, to one degree or another, by a number of reader-response theorists as pivotal. For example, see Fish, Rosenblatt, Tompkins.

[3] Richards, reconciling the tendency to privilege one approach to discourse over another, suggests unifying "inquiry into Justice on Platonic lines" for the first of these and "obeying Aristotle" for the second.

[4] Richards, following his studies of the classical Chinese philosopher, Mencius, came to prefer the term "translate." His use was more inclusive than we normally perceive it. For Richards, translation involved not just the exchange of one symbol system or language for another, but the transformation of a text on historical, cultural, and psychological planes as well as lexical. See Chapters 1 and 2 of Mencius on Mind and Chapter 3 of Speculative Instruments.

[5] Paul Ricoeur, in outlining his own theory of meaning, argues much the same point: "I say that interpretation is the process by which disclosure of new modes of being--or if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, of new forms of life--gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself" (Interpretation 94).

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